

Where Failure Is Changed to Success

By A. EVELYN NEWMAN

IN THE disillusionment, reaction and strife of this unhappy present, a visit to the Denver Opportunity School is good for the soul. It refreshes faith and hope in the principles of the new democracy, to which the Senate has recently given so deadly a blow. Brother and sisterhood, social justice and freedom under the law are spelled by the magic word, "Opportunity." The origin and success of the school are due to love, a love of helpful service in the hearts of women.

Superintendent Cole of the Denver schools, tells the following story:

"Some years ago while in charge of El Paso County, I was greatly troubled about a school in the mining district. One afternoon in early fall, after three men teachers had been driven away by the larger boys, the so-called 'rough neck' element, I was sitting in my office, pondering the subject, when a young woman entered to apply for a school. 'I have nothing,' I declared, 'nothing that you could handle. There is but one school left in the district and I would not dare send you there. Three men have already given it up as hopeless.' The young woman's dark eyes looked at me serenely as she answered: 'I am not afraid of any school.' There was that in her poise and manner, as well as in her words, that gave me confidence, so I said: 'Very well, you may take the school in the morning.'

"Several months afterward, I visited that district and was amazed at the change, not only in the general order and cleanliness of yards and homes, but in the conduct of the children and the whole atmosphere of the place. I found that the young woman teacher had regenerated the neighborhood. She had gone with the children into their homes, had made friends with their families and wherever she had seen a need, had helped to fill it. She taught, during school hours, what was in the school curriculum, but for the rest of the day she was ready to aid her pupils in all that interested them as a help to success in life. 'That girl,' declared Mr. Cole, 'was conducting a real opportunity school and through it was transforming the place. Then and there, I got my idea and later, when I came to Denver, I found Miss Griffith and Mrs. Miller to carry it out.'

The exterior of the famous school is unpromising looking enough. It stands at the corner of Thirteenth and Welton streets and presents a bare and dingy appearance. But once within its big front doors, you are conscious of warmth and cheer of the spirit. Instead of a forbidding-looking principal's office, an open top desk stands within a sheltered nook of the front corridor and before it all morning may be met the gracious presence of Miss Griffith, and all afternoon the kindly smile of Mrs. Miller, while in the evening, both the women are continually busy with the wants of their varied students.

On the day of my visit, I first entered the electrical supply room, where most of the students are convalescent soldier boys, dismissed from the recuperation camp at Aurora. While the Opportunity School is a public one in its support and management, its course of study is absolutely adjustable to the needs of applicants, any course in graded or high school work or along business or industrial lines being possible if as many as eight can be found who desire it. During the war, there was a Federal Aid Department, and the school has proved a godsend to many returning soldiers, not only as a source of new education, but as an actual home for some, like Italian Tony, who, when he returned from overseas, came to the school with bag and baggage. His duffel bag and small valise were placed in a friendly corner in the hall, and Tony was established as part-time worker and student. Many of these boys are laboring under a fifty or even ninety per cent physical disability, yet they work doggedly at their studies and experiments, sometimes fainting from weakness and over-concentration, I was told. Several students from the electrical supply department will soon be ready for technical college courses.

Across the hall we entered the automobile shop where we found many more overseas men, studying the construction, repairing and running of cars and trucks. Mrs. Miller pointed with pride to an open lot where the ground was being broken for an up-to-date new building for this work. It was in this department that I met an attractive middle-aged woman, working enthusiastically upon the repairing of a car. Her hair was becomingly arranged and securely kept in place by a net. If I am not mistaken, the very tip of her nose was powdered so that shininess could not appear. She was clad in overalls and was earnestly doing her job. She told me that she was enjoying every minute of it, though the only woman in the shop. The men and boys were kind and gracious comrades, like her own son whom she was expecting home from overseas. On his arrival, they were to open an automobile establishment; hence the reason for her presence there.

DELICIOUS odors from the nearby kitchen drew us unresisting into the cooking school. Several brides-to-be were taking the necessary lessons for their future husbands' comfort. There were also two or three unhappy little wives whose ignorance of this all-important topic had brought down their husband's displeasure upon their young heads. Through the sympathetic guidance of the capable teacher, we knew that their domestic problems would soon be solved. Beside them, a skilled housewife was learning new recipes and giving at the same time of her experienced knowledge,

and the pastry cook of a very wealthy family was adding to her menu of delicate desserts.

The millinery department was next door. Hat designs of all colors, sizes and descriptions were on exhibition and the workers looked happy. To this department anyone could bring her material and learn to make a becoming hat for herself or another. The head of this department had been a leading milliner in the most fashionable Denver store but had given up her position gladly for the sake of the school. "Women's hats affect not only their appearance, but their ability to cope with life," she remarked to me. "The other day I met a forlorn woman on the street car. Her hat was the most dilapidated I had ever seen. As fate would have it, she got off at my corner. I slipped my arm through hers and said, 'Won't you come over to the school for a little while? I am working on hats there and think that you will be interested.' A few hours later, the woman left rejuvenated, both in mind and appearance. Her new hat gave her a new impetus for living. She has been coming to the workroom every day since then and has the hope of a good position within a month."

Yes, they believe in looks in the Opportunity School, for right beside the show of head finery, is a beauty parlor, where men and girls alike go for manicures, facial massages and shampoos. That it is popular as a place of resort as well as study is shown by the motto on the wall, which announces in gay and ornamental lettering:

"IF YOU HAVE NOTHING TO DO,
PLEASE DON'T DO IT HERE."

However, the school is not given over merely to the vanities, as its largest department is the commercial one. It has thousands of students in its various branches of stenography, typewriting, bookkeeping, commercial arithmetic and geography, business English, dictaphone work and telegraphy. Every nook and corner of the thirty rooms of the old building are crowded to their uttermost limits and the entire lower hall beyond the stenography department is filled with typewriting machines. They were all being used that afternoon by earnest girls and boys who pounded away at the keys for dear life. In spite of many visitors and much noise in the corridors, it was not possible to distract their attention from their work. One little fellow, who didn't look over twelve, fascinated me by his great speed on the machine. He was thoroughly Latin in type and, as I caught his big dark eyes upon me, I went over to speak to him a moment. He smiled in a friendly way but his fingers continued the maddening pace, as he said: "I have but one-half hour here, so I must not waste a minute of it. Will talk to you later." He is in a telegraph office from which he can save little more than an hour a day. This time he gives to business English and stenography. He is thirteen and a half years old, he told me, and is alone in the world save for a French grandmother with whom he lives and whose sole support he is. Throughout the school, I found this same strict attention to business. There was no loafing in geography, spelling, English or arithmetic classes. Since the pupils had entered them from necessity's demands, nothing could interfere with their purpose.

Back beside the desk once more, I watched the stream of humanity that came in and out of the big

worked, the knowledge of fractions was demanded of him. His position was in jeopardy. He, too, had dependent ones who would suffer if he lost his job. Within a few moments, he was assured that his fraction obstacle could soon be overcome. The superintendent of the dry goods store was called up by Miss Griffith. He promised to be patient with the man for several weeks till he had mastered his difficulty. And just the other day, this man was promoted to a better position. With his new knowledge of fractions had come new power and opportunity.

ENDLESS stories might be told of this Denver experiment. Though scarcely more than four years old, it has a firmer grip on the hearts of the people than most institutions of half a century's standing. Because of its practical demonstration of love in the highest form of social service, its democracy is perfect, all inclusive. It knows no form of negation; only the affirmation of all good things of life. It has more than three thousand students, who pass through its doors between the hours of eight fifteen in the morning and nine fifteen at night. Most of its classes are forty-five minutes in length and the teachers are always present to help. Its youngest pupil I have already described in the little French boy of thirteen and a half years; the oldest is an old man of seventy-eight. He is a Dane by birth but has lived in the United States since young manhood. He has seven sons and fourteen grandsons, all loyal and useful American citizens. Up to America's entry into the war, he had deemed himself a citizen also. He had taken out his first papers more than thirty years ago. Through some neglect of the law, he had thought this proper nationalization and so had voted through all the years. Suddenly challenged on election day two years ago, he showed his papers only to find that they were but the slightest beginning toward his Americanization. Nothing daunted, he at once sought help at Opportunity. He was placed in the Immigrant English and Americanization classes and soon became their leading scholar. His citizenship has become a proud achievement, but interest still brings him to the classes.

It is during the evening hours that the scope and cosmopolitanism of the Opportunity School are most clearly seen. Students of every nationality and age pass smiling and content, from class to class. Everywhere there is a fine atmosphere of good will, created by Miss Griffith and Mrs. Miller and their splendid corps of teachers. As I stood at the bottom of the stairs, I watched them passing up and down—Chinese, Italian, Swede and Slav, every type of foreign young man and woman, soldier boys and factory girls. I was especially interested in a little Japanese in the Immigrant English class. She was a picture bride, that is, her husband had married her through a matrimonial agency, choosing her by photograph. She came, all confident, to meet him across the wide Pacific, and immediately after settling in Denver, her husband had brought her to Miss Griffith. There she sat, serenely intent upon her lesson, and beside her was a young French girl, the war bride of a returned soldier, brought likewise by her husband to learn the language of his country and its ways. It is with difficulty that the tiny Oriental is restrained from kissing the principal's feet as she passes, while her young French sister, with equal admiration but different custom, tries to kiss her hands.

Right here is the secret of the success of the Denver Opportunity School. It lies in the radiant personality of Miss Griffith, in the creative faith which she and her co-worker, Mrs. Miller, have in all humanity, a faith so contagious that the teachers have caught it also and dispense it to their pupils along with the knowledge of their subjects. Both the principal and assistant principal have learned the highest lesson from life's great university of experience, namely that renunciation of self is personality's finest fulfillment, that joy in work is its chief reward and that love is the open sesame to all mankind. Miss Griffith learned these lessons through years of strenuous apprenticeship. As a very young girl, she was a prairie school teacher herself. She has fought the battles of loneliness, poverty and many other sad and sordid things of life. But her faith in the highest has brought her to it, and now she is opening the door for thousands who had found it closed before.

Mrs. Miller, the assistant principal, came West years ago because of the illness of her husband. Suffering and service and the loss of deeply loved ones have taught her the courage and sweetness that make her such a strong right arm for Miss Griffith. Both are selfless followers of practical religion.

Could all of our centers of industrial strife throughout Pennsylvania, Indiana and the other warring states, could the steel, iron and coal industries all over the country have opportunity schools in their towns, with leaders such as Emily Griffith, leaders whose whole existence of body, mind and soul would be consecrated to selfless labor, to joy in the saving of others, and who, having a living belief of good in all mankind, would be able to find that good and so make its possessor happy, then indeed strikes would be ended, so-called "foreigners" and "hunkies" would disappear, and employers and employed would learn alike in these schools the true principles of democracy. Thus the problem of Americanization would be solved. The gospel of Denver's Opportunity School should become the gospel of education throughout America.

THIS is a story of the Denver Opportunity School. Here everyone is given an opportunity to make good. Whether you need instruction in arithmetic or cooking; whether your age is 13 or 81; whether you are American or foreign-born, the Opportunity School serves you and serves you well according to your particular needs.

front doors. The departing ones always called out goodbye to the smiling presence there, and to anxious newcomers that same presence was a benediction. A tired, middle-aged Swede, a carpenter by trade, came in for help. He had a wife and children to support and, with the present high cost of living, could not make both ends meet. Could he learn to read blueprints and do lathing, he thought that he might earn a little more. Assured that he could enter a blueprint class at once and within another week might take up lathing, he departed with new hope on his worn face. Another, a boy of about seventeen, with the hard look of grim necessity settled down upon him, now stood hesitatingly before the desk. I watched his hungry eyes meet the smile of the principal and heard her low voice giving him reassurance. He, too, went out with his burden lifted. Then I was told his story. He is working throughout the day and evenings, but has brief rest periods during which time he wishes to follow a course of study that will give him a high school education. He asked that a plan of first year work be made for him and that, at stated times, he be examined for promotion. There was that about him that gave the onlooker confidence in his purpose to accomplish.

Another man, almost middle-aged, now poured out his troubles. The source of them was fractions, which he had studied in his youth but had forgotten long ago. Suddenly in the dry goods department where he